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Letters in the Sand

By Morrie Mullins

Nothing about the way they dressed marked them as different from the Sophouse regulars. Their clothes - - loose-fitting, tan shirts and pants that might, weeks ago, have actually had pleats - - rode beneath a layer of dirt, grease, and space dust darkened in places by sweat stains. They sat in a booth in the back, beneath a flashing orange advertisement for "Gorksin Ale: The Year's Best Expansion Export." Their drinks, watery-sweet confections that had been delivered with a burst of flame but that now looked and smelled a little like drainage from the coolant tank of a wrecked speeder, sat untouched between them.

You saw them come in. You saw them - - the tall one and the dark one - - walk to their table, sit down, order, and lean toward one another. The Tarasin music coming from the speakers high in the corners settled to a dim caterwauling. The two men (almost everyone who was there agrees on only two things - - that they were male, and they were probably Human) didn't seem to notice the music, nor did they care when the first of the other patrons joined them.

The conversation remained low, but one by one, the regulars drifted to that back table. The first few walked past, heard something that caught their attention, and stopped to talk; the rest simply followed suit. After all, it wouldn't be Cularin if people weren't nosy.

Despite your better judgment, you took a seat at a nearby table. The rest of the talking in the cantina had died away, leaving the low hum of conversation from the tall one, the dark one, and their audience. They either had something very important to say or something was happening that someone - - maybe you - - would need to stop.

So you sat down, a little more than two meters away, took a sip of your drink, and cocked your head to listen.

"... in the sand." The big one picked up his drink as if he might take a chug, sniffed it, and put it back on the table. "Lots of trouble comes from that direction. Most of what's wrong on the planet. True?"

The dark one nodded.

"That's not the worst of it," the big one continued. His voice was a hungry rumble, low and insistent, like a wave poised to crash. "Nobody knows what's out there. It could be anything. People say you shouldn't be scared, there's Jedi all over the system. But you all saw what happened. That thing that was after the Jedi? They leveled buildings to kill it. They took out city

blocks. And do they have the credits to rebuild? No, because all their resources are going to help the war. If we still had all the Masters here that we used to have, that thing would never have gotten so far. It racked up a pretty body count."

Now the dark one raised his hand, balling his fingers into a fist before slowly uncurling them once more. His knuckles crackled like frying mynock. "That is not the problem." He spoke like he had a throat full of gravel. "The Jedi order will always do what the Jedi can do. But watch them. Listen to them. They do not say it, but the Jedi? Afraid. Lanius, he is not so big a fool as to not fear what is happening. All over the galaxy, Jedi are dying. The force for peace, for justice, is being wiped out. Is being sent into battle and not coming back. How many did one droid kill? But the problem is not that Jedi cannot defeat their enemies. All things must end. The Jedi must end, some day. For a thousand generations, they have served the Republic. But the Jedi are not eternal. What happens when they are gone?"

The others at the table murmured words you couldn't hear, but neither the dark one nor the tall one seemed to pay them any mind. They looked at one another, then at the table between them, waiting.

"You always talk doom and gloom," the tall one said, shaking his head. "Yes, the nature of the universe is impermanence. But that doesn't mean impermanence now. Just because this planet" -- he stomped the heavy heel of his boot on the faux-stone floor of the Sophouse -- "will probably be destroyed when Morasil or Termadus explodes, that doesn't mean we should worry about it today."

"Nobody's sending Morasil or Termadus off to fight a foolish war," the dark one grumbled. "The stars are the stars, my friend. They do what they have always done. If we were to pull them out of their orbits or fling a planet or two at them, just because we can, you see how long before they explode. You see. When the universe is not pushed; change comes slowly. When change is forced upon us, we see much more drastic effects. The Jedi are guardians and negotiators, not soldiers. But the order of things has been changed. We are all being asked to do things we've never done before. It's too much, too quickly. The center cannot hold."

The tall one glanced around, his expression almost surprised, as if he were noticing the crowd for the first time. "Assume you're right," he said, his eyes drifting past the dark one. "What do we do about it? What would happen if all the Jedi were to die? It's a ridiculous idea, but if we extend your metaphor -- suns exploding and all that -- isn't that the logical outcome? What does the galaxy lose if that happens?"

"Peace?" The voice came from one of the scruffy, dirty, smelly individuals who'd taken up positions against the nearby wall, nursing mugs of Rodian ale and listening to the conversation. In the cool glow of the orange advertisement flashing unevenly from the wall, they all looked alike, and all had the same dimly fearful, mostly inebriated slackness around their eyes.

"We don't know that, do we?" The tall one stared at the table rather than looking toward the speaker. "We don't. More to the point, we can't."

"Hard to lose something already lost," the dark one said. "If the Jedi

keep peace, where does this war come from? We have no peace. It might as well be that we have no Jedi."

The silence that followed his comment stretched like monofilament into the Sophouse dark. It shattered when the tall one spoke.

"Maybe things have moved beyond what the Jedi can handle," he said. "How long have we relied on them? Peacekeepers, negotiators, mystics. The Jedi mean something different to every person. Here on Cularin, they are noble, or they are thugs. Which Jedi have you met this week?"

"They are as stars in the sky," the dark one said. Now he did drink, grimacing as the colloidal goo passed his lips. "Numerous, but ancient. The light they offer was generations old when the first settlers came to Cularin. They burned out long ago, but only now do we see the dark they will leave behind."

The tall one pushed his glass across the table. "My friend sees darkness in every place there's light. Don't listen to him. We ask too much of the Jedi, that's all. We expect them to be more than mortal. That's just not possible. Somewhere, a long time ago, we knew that. Then we forgot. We started believing they were greater than us." He sighed, scratched his cheek.

"Then some of them started believing it. There is no death, there is the Force." He shook his head sadly. "If there is no death, what were those piles of flesh and bone that got scooped into bags and carried out of Hedrett when the droid was done with them? Philosophy only carries them so far. It's good to have something to guide your life. It's good to believe in something. But in the end, the world is what it is. The Jedi are too wrapped up in their mysteries to see that everyone else already knows how their story ends."

He shook a finger at the dark one. "But not when. It's inevitable that one day, there will be no more Jedi. But that day isn't today, my friend. Not today."

The dark one swallowed the last of his drink and eyed the glass the tall one had passed him. His face twisted in a scowl. "Today. Tomorrow. Yesterday. Always, you, with the linear universe. Time is not a line. Planets do not move in lines. The universe moves in its great ellipse, and everything that can happen, that will happen, already has happened."

The tall one reached across the table and took his glass back even as the dark one reached for it. "I should know better than to let you drink."

"The Jedi are already gone."

"The Jedi are still on Almas. Some of them are walking the streets here."

"Ghosts. Memories."

"Flesh and blood. But they've forgotten who they're supposed to be, what they're supposed to be doing. If they remembered, they'd be doing something different."

"But they're ghosts."

"They live on Almas. They train on Almas."

"They've forgotten who they are. What legacy will they leave behind?" The dark one leaned forward. "The Jedi don't even train new Padawans. No new Padawans on Almas. With no Padawans to carry on, what will they leave on Almas?"

"An Academy. A library. A museum." The tall one paused. "All right, then. You tell me, what are they going to leave on Almas?"

With a sad sigh, the dark one spread his hands palms up on the table. "Only letters in the sand, my friend. Only letters in the sand." Then his hand closed around the tall one's glass and he drank.